

INSIDE AMERICA'S

STORY BY PATRIK JONSSON / STAFF WRITER
PHOTOS BY ANN HERMES / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Leaning against a scrub pine as preschoolers scurry about at his feet, Shane Gazda, father of 3-year-old twins, recalls a conundrum he faced earlier that morning: whether to take his Smith & Wesson .40 caliber handgun to a Groundhog Day celebration in this town's White Deer Park.

After all, what was once against the law in North Carolina — carrying a concealed gun in a town park, square, or greenway — is now, as of Dec. 1, 2011, very much allowed. To Mr. Gazda, who likes to shoot targets in his backyard, an event as innocent as paying homage to a rodent could turn dangerous if the wrong person shows up.

"Part of it is being ready for cataclysm every day," says Gazda, a hospital maintenance engineer. "And to be honest, I started carrying precisely to protect not just myself, but my family, and anyone around me who needs help."

In the end, Gazda left the gun at home. But his internal debate is emblematic of one a growing number of Americans are having almost daily. Thirty years after

a powerful gun-control movement swept the country, Americans are embracing the idea of owning and carrying firearms with a zeal rarely seen since the days of muskets and militias.

A combination of favorable court rulings, grassroots activism, traditional fears of crime, and modern anxieties about government has led to what may be a tipping point on an issue that just a few years ago was one of America's most contentious. Gun rights have now expanded to the point where the fundamental question seems not to be "should we be able to carry guns," but instead is "where can't we carry them?"

The answer: not very many places. The new North Carolina statute, in fact, is one of hundreds of new gun-friendly laws enacted by states and localities in the past few years alone. Mississippi lawmakers, for instance, recently voted to allow gun owners who take an extra safety class to carry hidden weapons on college campuses and in courthouses. Ohio has granted people with permits the right to bring concealed weapons into restaurants, bars, and sports arenas. A 2010 Indiana law stipulates that private business owners let employees keep guns in their cars when parked on company property. And New Hampshire, along with several other states, has removed restrictions

on bearing arms in the ultimate politically symbolic place — the State House.

In 2009, three times as many pro-gun laws were passed in the United States as antigun measures — a trend that experts say has only accelerated since then. Fully 40 states now mandate that anyone who asks for a concealed-carry permit and meets the qualifications must be issued one. One result: The number of concealed-weapon license holders in the US has gone from a few hundred thousand 10 years ago to more than 6 million today. In some parts of Tennessee, 1 out of every 11 people on the street is either carrying a weapon or has a license to do so.

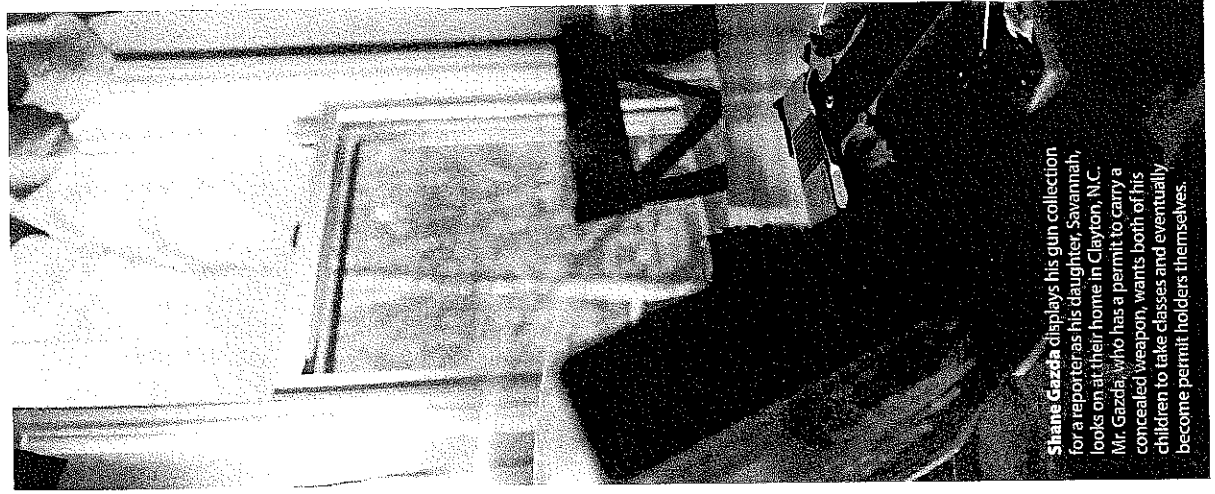
"It's a huge sea change, and one lesson to take out of all of this is that it's amazing how fast attitudes on constitutional issues can change," says Glenn Reynolds, a law professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, and the author of "An Army of Davids." "The thinking has turned in a way that many thought to be impossible only 15 years ago."

Resistance to the ubiquity of guns remains, of course, mainly in the urban North. It is perhaps telling that New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who is prohibited from seeking another term and who has millions of his own money to spend, has become the preeminent gun-control spokesman in the country. Freshman Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel is worried about an overly armed populace, too: Last month, he proposed a statewide registry for handgun owners.

But the vast majority of the momentum on guns is on the side of people who want a .30-30 rifle in their cabinet at home and the right to carry a Ruger in their coat pocket — anywhere. It is being driven, in part, by what could be called a "militia of one" mentality. While 20 years ago many people were arming themselves as part of a nostalgic identification with citizen armies, many today see carrying a gun in public as an essential right and a legitimate, even necessary, tool to ease peculiar and particular American fears about personal protection.

"People are buying guns to deal with their anxiety of feeling they have no safety or they have this need for their political sense of freedom, but not everybody shares that level of personal threat," says Joan Burbick, author of "Gun Show Nation," a critique of American gun culture. "And when you're going to insist upon this in public spaces or shared spaces like a basketball game or a park, then you're really intruding into where other people get their personal sense of safety."

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Shane Gazda displays his gun collection for a reporter at his home in Savannah, N.C. Mr. Gazda, who has a permit to carry a concealed weapon, wants both of his children to take classes and eventually become permit holders themselves.

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FOCUS

GUN CULTURE



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How did embracing guns become so pervasive, and is the country safer or more dangerous as a result?

GARNER IS TYPICAL of the towns in America's new "Gun Belt." The community of 26,000 people in the piney woods of North Carolina is decidedly not Southern, but neither is it completely Northern. It is a hamlet of conservative-leaning Democrats, 70 percent of whom are transplanted Yankees.

It marries rural roots with a suburban mind-set, all in a tableau of minivans and Easter egg hunts. Last year, the national Pony League softball tournament (for girls under 12 years of age) was held in White Deer Park. The town abuts more urban Raleigh, which perennially is listed as one of America's "best places to live."

It is here along the edges of America's urban renaissance that the right-to-carry movement is burgeoning, with women, young professionals, and college students among those leading what some call a "new social formation" of heat-packers. On this day, two moms, Barbara Frickman and Angela Reeves, are arriving with their strollers and toddlers to see Mortimer, Garner's famed groundhog. Both question North Carolina's new guns-in-parks law, but then acknowledge that they, too, have concealed weapons permits.

"Around kids, guns are scary, but jogging on the greenway at night? That's a different story," says Ms. Frickman.

In that way, the two women represent a new, largely pro-gun demographic. A majority of married women support the right to carry a concealed weapon in America, while single women, on the whole, do not. Overall, 85 percent of Americans support the right to keep and bear arms, according to a survey by Angus Reid Public Opinion. A 1991 poll by the Los Angeles Times put that number at 68 percent.

Yet Americans are hardly monolithic in their views. In a Monitor/UTPP poll conducted in February, a majority of those surveyed said they supported more restrictive gun rights. Southerners, people between the ages of 18 and 24, and those earning between \$50,000 and \$75,000 a year made up the "only" major demographic groups where the majority favored less restrictive gun laws. Not surprisingly, gun rights are more broadly supported in factory towns and rural areas than in suburban and downtown zones.

Some of that ambivalence is reflected in Garner, where views on guns don't all ways fall along predictable lines. Ronnie Williams, for instance, is the town mayor and, as a born and bred North Carolinian, someone you'd expect to be a committed gun rights enthusiast. He isn't.

Mr. Williams, in fact, is proud that he's never owned a gun. Since the state's passage of the more expansive concealed

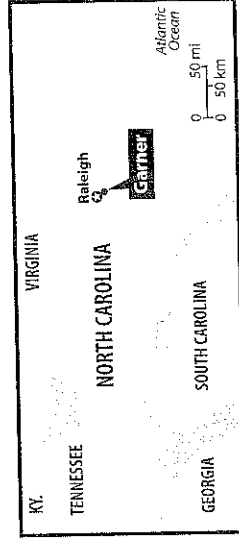
weapons law, he has worked with the town council to designate places where guns remain forbidden.

"On one hand, you have grandpas and grandmas who don't feel that a local basketball game or baseball game is the right place for guns because emotions can get so heated," says the affable mayor who, as any self-respecting local dignitary, is dressed for the Groundhog Day celebration in a



'The fear is that a parent who is a gun carrier is going to get ticked off at a referee and pull out his or her gun. People don't want to be thrust into an environment where somebody might get carried away.'

—Ronnie Williams, mayor of Garner, on why some people don't want guns in all public places, as he oversees a Groundhog Day event in tuxedo and top hat



Garner, North Carolina

Population: 26,000 Median family income: \$58,000

Origins: started out as a railroad stop between Goldsboro and Charlotte

Top employers: local schools; laminate flooring manufacturer Pargo; the Hamilton Companies, a commercial construction supplier

Racial makeup:

Favorite son: Scotty McCreery, "American Idol" winner

*Due to rounding, numbers do not add up to 100%.

RICH CLABOUGH/STAFF

tuxedo and top hat. "The other side of the message is, if I'm walking down the greenway and bad guys try to rape my wife or girlfriend, I want to carry my gun so I can kill ... them."

Gazda, on the other hand, probably shouldn't be a gun proponent. He is a refugee from gun-wary New York who grew up in a household of women, which included his mother, grandmother, aunt — and no firearms.

Yet, like many transplanted Northerners, he journeyed south partly to avoid what he considers overbearing government edicts. Gazda lives in an edge-of-suburbia home with a sign at the end of the driveway that warns of "vicious dogs." It refers to two golden retrievers who greet visitors with snobbering affection.

In his backyard, he has a playground set built out of scrap wood. It is here he also likes to practice shooting his guns. He takes out his Smith & Wesson and fires off a round. The sound crackles through the woods. The pistol is large, but, because of its high-tech composite frame, surprisingly light.

"I see it as a tool granted me by the Constitution, plain and simple," says Gazda. "And [the government's] always going to be trying to take that tool away from me."

Gazda bought his first gun five years ago when he got his concealed-carry permit but admits buying several more when Barack Obama was elected president, out of concern that the administration would try to limit gun rights.

He points out that the general decline in the violent crime rate doesn't mean the country isn't dangerous. "One day when he left the gun behind, he was accosted," he says, by a convenience store owner who refused to let his two children use the bathroom. "I felt threatened, and since then I always take it with me on trips with the family," he says.

FEAR FOR PERSONAL SAFETY is a major reason many people want to be able to own and carry a gun. Some see themselves as a sort of self-appointed family constable.

"There's a kind of Second Amendment reconstructionism going on which has to do with Western individuality, freedom from coercion ... moving about and not having to explain your business to people," says Brian Anse Patrick, a University of Toledo professor and author of "Rise of the Anti-movement's underground presses." "They may not think Washington is their friend, and they're certain that bureaucrats are working against their right to own guns. But it has less to do with resisting government authority and more about family. I want to be able to defend myself, I want the right to travel and refrain from fear, and this little .38 special here helps me achieve that."

Yet a little defiance of government authority. Continues on next page



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thority is mixed in there as well. "The Democratic Party in many ways overinvested in symbolic legislation on gun control, which explains the backlash from hunters or people who have a legitimate reason to feel unsafe and want a gun by their bedside," says Sanford Levinson, a University of Texas constitutional law professor and expert on the Second Amendment. "But the more important thing is that the Republican Party has done over 25 years, which is to really delegitimize national government and make people feel that the national government is not merely incompetent, but also likely to be antagonistic and maybe even tyrannical."

The 9/11 attacks reinforced the view among many Americans that dark forces lurk in society that people need to defend themselves against. While the overall violent crime rate is down, a re-

cent poll by Rasmussen Reports showed that 72 percent of Americans feel that local crime will increase in the near term. Some experts say this generalized anxiety is reflected in the popularity of movies and TV shows about zombies and similar topics. The grim mood hasn't gone unnoticed by ammo manufacturers, one of which is trying to capitalize on the zeitgeist by selling a line of Zombie Max cartridges and shells.

Paul Valone is another reason America is more heavily armed today. One day in 1994, Mr. Valone, an airline pilot, was watching lawmakers on C-SPAN press their case for an assault weapons ban in Congress. Outraged, he called around to various gun rights groups to find out what he could do. Frustrated with their response, he eventually launched his own group, Grass Roots North Carolina, which has evolved into a potent lobbying force in the state.

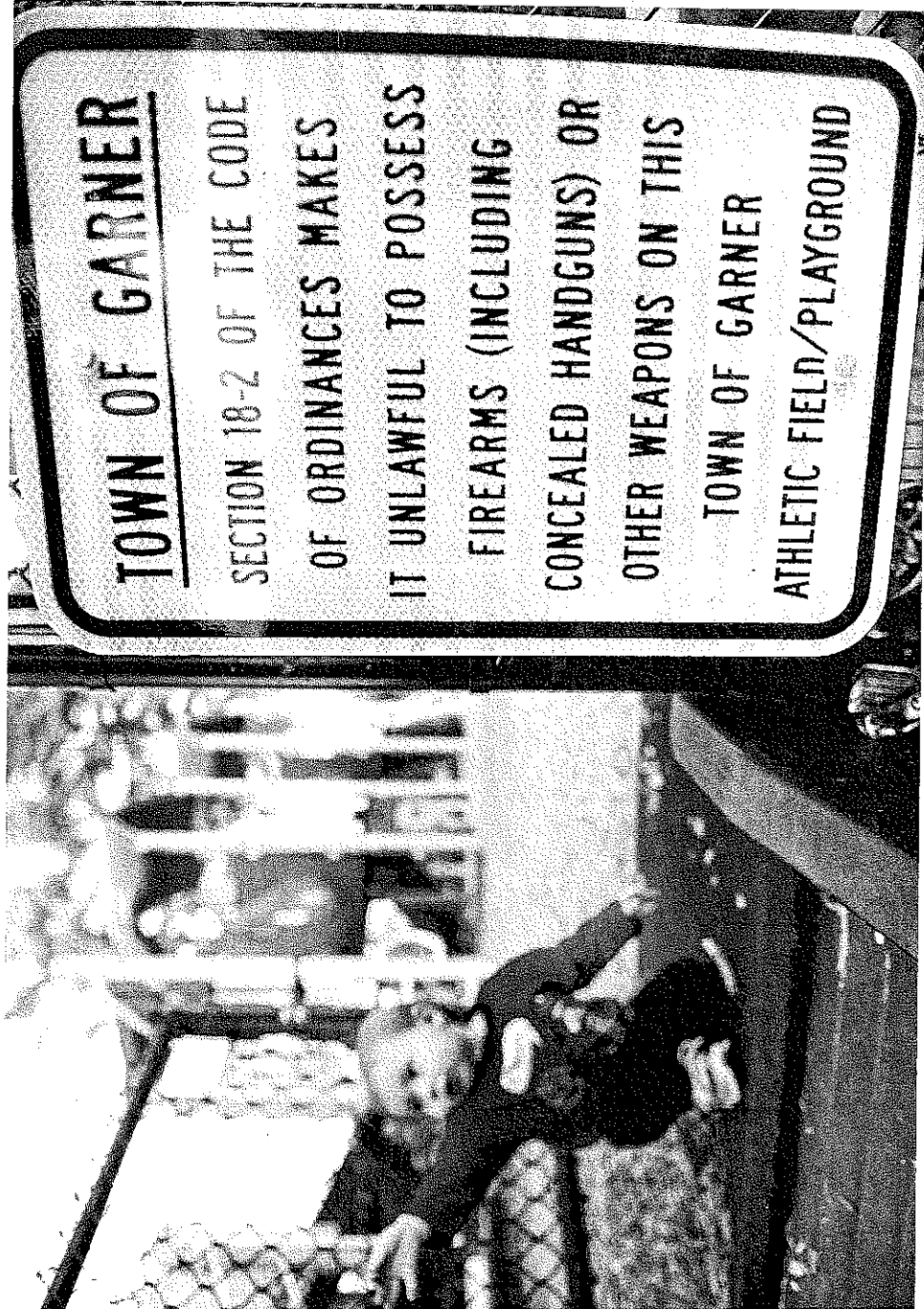
While many people automatically assume the expansion of gun rights is linked to the power of the National Rifle Association (NRA) — which does

remain a magnum political force in Washington and across much of the country — others say it is the effectiveness of smaller, and often more uncompromising, groups like Valone's that are shifting the debate. Many of them are run by just a handful of committed activists who spread their frequently tart messages through pamphlets, blogs, and massive e-mail lists.

It was Valone's group, for instance, that largely wrote the state's recently passed park carry law and a more general concealed weapons statute before that. When a bill mandating stricter storage for guns at home was introduced in the state legislature in 2001, Grass Roots North Carolina helped

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Toddler Bryson Allen enjoys himself at a playground in Garner, N.C., free of guns. Though the state passed a law last year allowing permit holders to carry concealed weapons in public parks, local officials can still regulate them in certain recreational areas.



Tim Kitts shoots at an indoor firing range at the Personal Defense & Handgun Safety Center, a gun shop in Raleigh, N.C., that offers certification courses for people who want a concealed-weapons permit.

people in the environment, you come up with this very shortsighted but direct solution, which is carry a gun."

ACTUALLY, IT ISN'T NECESSARILY A SIMPLE or direct solution. In Garner, you almost need a surveyor's transit to be able to figure out where you can't go with a weapon. Once the state law allowing carrying a concealed gun was passed, local officials began carving out places where they didn't want people bringing pistols.

In White Deer Park, for instance, permit holders are allowed to carry concealed weapons in almost all areas, with the exception of a little nature center and the playground, which is marked by a (some-what) clearly defined bed of mulch. Elsewhere across Garner, the town council has decreed gyms, ball fields, and other public zones off limits to gun carriers, most marked by signs and all delineated, in painstaking detail, in a municipal ordinance.

Other cities across North Carolina, including Raleigh and Winston-Salem, have exempted areas in more general language—banning guns from all playgrounds and sports facilities, for instance—which Valone's group is planning to challenge.

This patchwork of firearm-carry and firearm-free zones is a metaphor for where gun laws have evolved in many states—from a concerted move by opponents to keep them out of people's hands as a matter of principle to the view that, OK, you can carry them, including in public, just not in these specific areas. It's a long way from where much of the country was 40 years ago.

Back in the 1960s and '70s, a formidable gun control movement formed out of concern about urban crime. Widespread riots and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy and, later, the wounding of President Reagan added to concerns about the prevalence of guns. Other high-profile shootings, including the killing of five children in Stockton, Calif. in 1989 and the slaying of four federal agents during a siege at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993, focused attention on assault weapons in particular.

A bevy of national laws followed—restrictions on mail-order rifle sales in 1988, the outlawing of "cop killer" bullets in 1984, the establishment of "drug-free school zones" in 1990 that included stiff penalties for anyone carrying guns in those areas, an assault weapons ban in 1994. By most accounts, the assault weapons ban, which tellingly expired in 2004, marked the end of the gun control arc.

The urban unrest and assassinations of the '60s and '70s inspired a magical thinking where guns symbolized evil, and to ban guns was to ban evil," says Mr. Reynolds of the University of Tennessee. "But as those psychological traumas receded, replaced by a fresh batch of psychological traumas, we kind of fell back into the normal and... traditional."

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Concealed weapon laws by state

Shall issue concealed-weapon permits to residents only

22 states are required to issue any private citizen who is a resident of the state a concealed-weapon permit as long as he or she meets a set of requirements. These vary from state to state but include such things as taking a gun-safety class, submitting to fingerprinting, and not having a criminal record.

Shall issue to residents and nonresidents

18 states are required to issue a concealed-carry permit to both residents and nonresidents, provided they meet all requirements.

May issue to residents only

4 states and the District of Columbia retain the authority to deny or grant a concealed-weapons permit to residents even after they have met all requirements.

May issue to residents and nonresidents

5 states retain the authority to deny or grant a permit to residents and nonresidents.

Does not allow concealed weapons

1 state prohibits private citizens from carrying handguns.

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defeat it by branding the measure as "the rapist protection act."

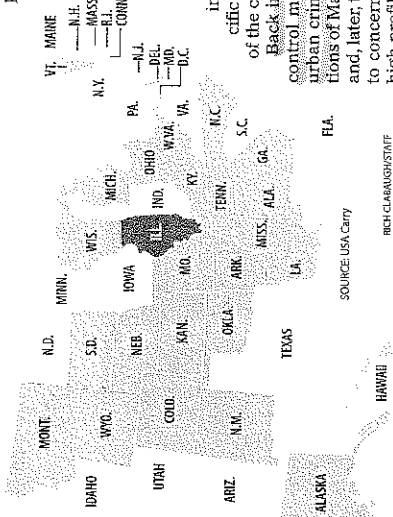
Currently, the group is pushing to expand the concealed carry law so people can bring guns into restaurants. It is also in court trying to thwart the ability of authorities to suspend concealed-carry permits during declared emergencies. The lawsuit stems from an incident a few years ago in King, N.C., where a looming snowstorm sparked a temporary weapons ban out of concern that people in the middle of a crisis may be too quick to solve problems with the barrel of a gun.

Similarly, in 2010, Gov. Bev Perdue (D) prohibited carrying guns in public in anticipation of the arrival of hurricane Earl, which coincided with hunting season. Grass Roots North Carolina argues she turned 11,000 dove hunters into criminals.

"People like to explain all of this away as the gun lobby doing its work, but it's really peasants with pitchforks," says Valone. "We were the tea party before the tea party was cool."

While Valone and other gun rights advocates talk of an army of "peaceable citizens," a term coined by Sam Adams, critics see this as a romanticized view of an armed populace—and a dangerous one. They believe Americans should be able to solve problems without resorting to a cocked pistol.

"You go from self-defense to political freedom. And every step along the way you get to expand gun rights, you have a victory for political freedom. That's a heady equation," says Ms. Burbick, who studies culture and politics at Washington State University in Pullman. "It's simple, it's straightforward, but nobody seems to be able to test it's accurate. So instead of funding town parks at a level where you can manage the environment and the



The pro-gun movement has been expanding ever since, aided in part by favorable legal rulings and writings. In 1989, Mr. Levinson, the Texas law professor, wrote a notable essay in the Yale Law Review in which he suggested that citizen participation in government might extend to the Second Amendment.

Levinson looked specifically at whether "ordinary citizens [should] participate in the process of law enforcement and defense of liberty rather than rely on professionalized peacekeepers, whether we call them standing armies or police." Gun rights activists consider it a hinge moment in the gun debate, since it marked one of the first such dissections of the Second Amendment by a liberal legal scholar.

More recently, two US Supreme Court decisions — *Dist. of Columbia v. Heller* (in 2008) and *McDonald v. Chicago* (in 2010) — have buttressed the constitutional right of Americans to own weapons for self-defense.

While all this was going on, pro-gun laws were gathering momentum in statehouses. In 1987, Florida passed the nation's first "shall-issue" concealed-carry weapons law. It meant that the state was required to issue a permit to anyone who wanted to carry a concealed gun in public places; provided the applicant met a set of requirements.

These vary from state to state but include such things as paying a license fee, taking a safety training class or exam, submitting to fingerprinting, and having a criminal-free record. Today all but 10 states have shall-issue carry laws, four of which (Alaska, Arizona, Vermont, Wyoming) require no permit at all to harbor a hidden weapon.

Other laws passed in various states range from an expansion of the "castle doctrine" — broadening the right to use a gun to defend your home to include your front yard, boat or workplace — to returning gun rights to nonviolent felons.

Even President Obama, long considered by the NRA as an enemy of the Second Amendment, has acquiesced on the issue. He signed legislation in 2009 — which admittedly was part of a compromise budget bill — that for the first time allowed people to carry concealed guns in national parks. It coincided with concerns about crime in the nation's premier outdoor playgrounds.

Not all laws, of course, have been so gun-friendly. Mayor Bloomberg, for one, is trying to make it harder for people to buy weapons at gun shows, which he says contribute to violent crime in America's cities. Other urban areas, including Washington, D.C., and Chicago, have tried to skirt the recent Supreme Court rulings by essentially banning guns in other ways, such as through zoning or onerous licensing laws.

BEHIND THE PROLIFERATION of less-restrictive laws — and guns themselves — looms a question as old as the flintlock: Does having more weapons in people's hands make society more, or less, safe?

Partisans on both sides marshal their numbers. Gun critics have long been concerned that concealed carry laws will lead to more routine disputes being settled with a bullet, especially if the weapons end up on the wrong hips.

In December, The New York Times examined how many concealed-weapon permit holders in North Carolina had committed past crimes. Out of 260,000 licensees, it found that roughly 2,600 had committed at least a nontraffic-related misdemeanor; and 200 had committed felonies; 10 of those were manslaughter or murder convictions.

That amounts to about 1 percent of the total permit holders, but, to critics, the point was clear: It's

'AROUND KIDS, GUNS ARE SCARY, BUT JOGGING ON THE GREENWAY AT NIGHT?

THAT'S A DIFFERENT STORY.'

— Barbara Frickman, a Garner, N.C., parent, explaining why she opposes guns in a local park but has a concealed-carry permit herself



not only "peaceable citizens" who are granted the right to carry concealed weapons in public, and it's far from certain whether the state is effective in revoking licenses when a carrier commits a crime.

More broadly, the Violence Policy Center, a gun control group, found that between 2007 and 2009 concealed-carry permit holders killed 117 people in the US, including nine law enforcement officers. But other surveys have found that guns are used defensively to stop a crime — from simple assault to rape and burglary — without death or injury as many as 2.5 million times a year, according to research done by Gary Kleck, a criminologist at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

Moreover, the number of deaths caused by a gun in the US has been declining even though the number of guns carried in public has been growing. Federal statistics show that between 2005 and 2009, the number of annual murders committed with a gun dropped from 10,158 to 9,146. During the same period, the number of justifiable, or defensive, homicides rose from 196 to 261.

After looking at the plethora of research on the topic, the Chronicle of Higher Education recently concluded: "No scholars now claim that legalizing concealed weapons causes a major increase in crime."

What some criminologist says about the impact of more people carrying guns, however, doesn't really matter to many people in Garner, or beyond. Most don't look to sterile statistics to validate whether they should tote a sidearm or not. It's about what makes them feel safe.

FOR JOE BINNS, that means no Colt .45 under his coat. A retired coal miner from Pennsylvania who spends his winters in Garner, Mr. Binns believes all guns — even hunting rifles — should be locked in the local police station. If someone wants to shoot a deer or turkey, they can go down to the station house and check out their Browning or Springfield.

"Guns everywhere, it's ridiculous," he says. "If you're in trouble, call the cops."

Many others here clearly disagree, including Gazda, even if not all of them are willing to say so vocally.

At the Personal Defense & Handgun Safety Center, a gun shop and shooting range in Raleigh that offers certification courses, owner Mike Tilley notes how concealed carry classes have gotten so big that his staff has had to move them to a nearby conference center.

He says that many of the attendees come from surrounding communities, including liberal Chapel Hill. When he asks them why they don't take classes in their own area, the answer is revealing.

"They don't want their family or neighbors to know," he says. "There's still an uneasiness about gun carry, this persistent and collective idea that guns are bad."

Guns are displayed at the Personal Defense & Handgun Safety Center in Raleigh, N.C. Weapons sales have risen as states have passed concealed carry laws.

Discussion Web

Issue/Topic	
Statement or Key Question	
Gun Rights / Control	
What is behind the push to expand gun rights?	
Arguments for	Arguments against
<div>Source:</div>	<div>Source:</div>
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Conclusions	

Is America safer, or more dangerous?